

Academic hospitality to beat the odds

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

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For the last decade, research intensive universities in Europe have extolled the virtues of their interdisciplinarity in their strategic plans (Sutphen et al, 2018; Stensaker et al., 2019). However, as several authors indicate, the education part of the picture is easier said than done (Klein 2010; Lyall et al, 2011; Lyall and Fletcher, 2013; Lash-Marshall et al, 2017; Taylor, 2018; Lindvig et al, 2019).

Academics who are committed to teaching interdisciplinarily must overcome myriad barriers imposed by their university's system of governance and internal economies, and the challenges of understanding colleagues' epistemological traditions and values. Yet they persist in defiance of the difficulties they face.

Drawing on concepts of collaboration and academic hospitality (Phipps and Barnett, 2007), this paper sketches how academics in five European universities collaborate interdisciplinarily and how they engage, often unwittingly, in academic hospitality.

Full paper

Despite structural and epistemic challenges, for decades academics have persevered in their efforts to teach with colleagues from other disciplines (Lattuca, 2001; Taylor, 2018; Lindvig et al, 2019). This paper contributes to the growing body of research on difficulties academics face when they collaborate on and for interdisciplinary education.

This paper draws on data collected for the project Academic Hospitality in Interdisciplinary Education (AHIE) that studies collaboration in interdisciplinary education in six institutions located in five countries. Through analysis of observations of and interviews with academics, administrators, students, and university leaders from interdisciplinary programmes at each university, we seek to understand how, why, and when colleagues collaborate to teach interdisciplinarily. We have used an abductive and reflexive approach to the data collected, where we have moved iteratively among theories and data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Inspired by the core principles of deliberative communication we negotiated and reflected on our interpretations until we reached a shared

understanding of our narrative and analysis (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2020). We have chosen this approach because it demands we negotiate our interpretations of data, with each project member contributing different expertise.

As an analytical frame for studying collaboration, we use the concept of academic hospitality (Phipps & Barnett, 2007). Academics engage in academic hospitality when colleagues: share ideas, methods, and concepts with each other, whether from the same or different disciplinary tribes (epistemological hospitality); provide resources such as time, money, books, to each other or students (material hospitality); welcome fellow academics who travel to new locations, whether across the globe or from across a campus (touristic hospitality); and use language to develop a shared repertoire to communicate across disciplines or educational environments, such as across clinical and non-clinical teachers. We have also found useful the concept of affective hospitality (Zembylas, 2019; Imperiale et al., 2021) with its emphasis on conversations as modes of engaging in academic hospitality and academic hospitality might be lived out in relationships.

We have found different ways collaborations form, as for example, one academic explained about their motivation for finding an interdisciplinary group: 'I was quite lonely at my department, and so I was really looking for people to collaborate with because I came from a very interdisciplinary, very vibrant department in the UK. And then here I felt very much on my own (in) a department with mostly old men that knew each other from when they studied . . . so I think that I was really reaching out to anyone at the university looking for opportunities.' Through a university competition for funds for interdisciplinary research and education, the academic found others and formed a group from the natural sciences, psychology, law, and education. The group has developed equitable, non-competitive norms and shared practices for collaboration. The academic noted that they 'have a drive that is not like fame or, it's they want to make the world better, and it's really intrinsic. I think it can actually be a good example how things could work interdisciplinarily. . . (and) can solve things, and then I think you can actually have a really policy impact as well, with the results.' The group engages in linguistic hospitality to translate concepts and ideas and come to a common agreement, or as the person interviewed noted: 'So a lot of time we spend around discussing 'what does sustainability mean,' so there was some discussion, and (one member of the group) really wanted to keep on talking about it. . . So we need to have a common understanding of what sustainability means.'

Another research participant echoed the need to devote time and energy to develop relationships for interdisciplinary work: 'My view is that you need to spend as much time and resources and energy on the collaborative relationships as you do on doing the work and that is very invisible. It's not resourced. It can be hugely fruit, fruitful and generative. But it is difficult to sustain over a period of time, if that is invisible within the system.' The sharing of time, energy, and resources are forms of material and affective hospitalities, because the interdisciplinary venture depends on collaboration where participants must be willing to devote time – a scarce resource for many – and generosity to what may seem meandering conversations or understanding each other' epistemic traditions.

This paper will conclude with an analysis of the role academic hospitality plays in collaboration and how to translate it to interdisciplinary education.

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